

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Seeing through cinema verite in *Wanda and Marilyn Times Five*

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I recently saw two film that dealt with portraits of women as victims. The contrast between them and the deeper questions they raised about the way certain current films try to make a social comment were striking. The first film was *WANDA* (1970) by Barbara Loden, a semi commercial feature in which Loden plays the title role. Tracing a period of time in the life of a young woman, it is the familiar cinema verite style fictional slice of life." The second film was a short work by New American Cinema veteran Bruce Connor, *MARILYN TIMES FIVE* (1968-73), which uses "found" footage to attempt a discovery of Marilyn Monroe.

WANDA is about the situation of a lower class woman and how she is messed over. Wanda never smiles, except for a wistful and pitiful twitch at the corner of her mouth, which quickly vanishes. In one episode after another, she is exploited by a series of men. She has no hope, no way out of her miserable existence. While the film seems simply to record Wanda's life, giving no solution and no perspective to show "why" as well as how," *WANDA* has a message: Wanda is a victim.

Wanda is never shown as caring for her children, or for any other people, or even for things — she never picks up a flower, or looks at the sky, or even cares about the weather. The only time there is the faintest hint she actually cares about anything around her or what happens to her is when she's given some shopping money and she buys curlers and a lipstick. This vision of a near-catatonic woman is uncompromising, to be sure, and therein lies the picture's claim to affective power. But if we ask how Wanda's oppression might be ended, the film provides no

answer. Wanda is not merely oppressed, but powerless, totally powerless. And she has no qualities that might be used to change her situation. She is not even granted the guile to prostitute formally, but only to be picked up for the price of a beer or cheap meal, have her body used, and then discarded. She has no-expectations of money or love for this use, and she gets neither.

Nothing we see suggests that Wanda has the potential to want love, or money, or beauty, or warmth, or anything. She moves through her social reality in Brownian motion, with no more control than a particle. As writer, director, and actress. Loden presents a notion of Wanda's character as fixed. Therefore, by recording a number of sequential events, a full portrait of Wanda presumably results. With this concept in mind the film pays no attention to how Wanda became what she is shown to be, nor how external changes in her life affect Wanda, nor how the character fits into larger social processes. The Wanda on the screen is all we know, and from Loden's view, all we need to know.

Loden is uncompromising in showing us nothing positive about Wanda. Only when Wanda fends off a rapist and escapes does she assert herself, but then only in a negative way. The camera angle (high above the front seat of a convertible), the actions (Wanda is not very visible and when she incapacitates the attacker she runs off), and the rapid pace make this only a negative self-assertion: she won't submit to rape. If the camera had shown her face during the action, or how she stopped her assailant, or even a split moment of his agony, we could feel some sense of triumph in her escape and some sense of Wanda taking her life in her hands. But we don't. Her victory is robbed of any significance by directorial decisions.

The film portrays Wanda's total passivity in the face of life, her lack of freedom, indeed the meaninglessness of the concept of "freedom" for her, and in this it is one of the most depressing and nihilistic films I have ever seen.

WANDA is not a bad film, but it is a severely limited one. This is why, when I came out of the screening, I was angry with it. I wasn't offended by the film itself — for it is remarkable in accomplishing what it apparently intends, and it certainly deserves showing and wider audiences than it has had — but because WANDA stands for so much in contemporary cinema, especially in noncommercial cinema. The film draws on U.S. cinema verite documentary, and Italian neorealism, and early Shirley Clarke and John Cassavetes: a general story, untrained actors in subordinate roles, use of available locations and lighting, a grainy color (blown up from 16mm to 35mm), sometimes

improvisational camera work and acting, and editing which isn't perfectly invisible probably because there wasn't time or money for saving shots. Basically this type of film is the cinematic equivalent of 19th century literary naturalism. The form, the "documentariness" of the whole, makes WANDA completely flat and opaque. Thus the film maker hides her analysis behind the structuring of the film. There is no complexity in WANDA, only the recording of actions and details. It's all just there to see, recorded, and without irony. The camera does not stand apart from and look down on Wanda as a victim, but sees her straight on and follows her journalistically, as faithful and impassive as a machine can be. The denial, through the film's form, of ambiguity or irony is immediately noticeable. If you like the film, you naturally think of the adjectives, "truthful," or "uncompromising," or "real." And those who hold irony and ambiguity as superior values in film reject this kind of cinema for being so unrelievedly obvious.

I don't think irony and ambiguity are wonderful. More often than not in film they are supreme copouts, attempting to make shallowness look profound and masking lack of thought; but I still don't like WANDA. Right now WANDA stands in my mind for the poverty of U.S. cinema verite, because implicit in the use of cinema verite in documentary and in fictional narrative, has been the idea that you are seeing "the truth," that the director will not tell you what to believe, that you must come to your own conclusions, that the film is not manipulative. But it really is manipulative, just at another level. This type of film easily takes the surface of things, takes the "reality" presented as sufficient, and in the last analysis it usually accepts the world as it is. Thereby it leaves us with only the conclusion that we should, after all, just cultivate our metaphoric gardens.

If we see Wanda as "like us" we can only feel that indeed there is nothing to be done but suffer. But oppression, even at its most severe, most dehumanizing, does not destroy all human impulses. WANDA presents us not with "reality" but with a textbook pathology of catatonia. The person I saw the film with was impressed with it: that it didn't pretty up the situation of women, or of the lower class, that it rested as a damning indictment of U.S. society. But an indictment, to use the legal sense, means something because it exists within a context — the judicial system — that gives it meaning. WANDA shows only the results, and none of the causes of the results, and this is its biggest failing, for it offers no way to understand them, no way to combat them, no way to struggle for liberation. If we watch the film without analysis or perspective of our own, and see Wanda as an "other," unlike us, we can only pity her and be outraged that she is in such a position.

The form of the film allows it to propose no solution to the situation it depicts. And this is what is most maddening about it. Not that tacking on a solution would solve things. It would not be improved by having Wanda at the end walk into a women's liberation meeting and discover the warmth of sisterhood; nor would it be adequately resolved if she was suddenly talked into joining the Job Corps by a social worker so she could have a steady job instead of living as (and being treated as) a parasite on the next man who comes along; nor would it be solved by having her meet up with a nice nonsexist United Mine Workers rank and file organizer who could show her self respect by working for change in her corner of Appalachia. All of these new endings would seem especially false, because the film really contains an implicit but disguised analysis of Wanda as victim.

But a victim of what? The film does not seem to answer. Thus anyone in the audience can fit in whatever analysis they like. The psychological: Wanda is a victim of herself, of her low self-image. The feminist separatist: Wanda is a victim of all men. The socialist: Wanda is a victim of capitalism. And so on. The viewers can just as easily propose the solutions to her dilemma. She needs therapy; women should live apart from men; we need to overthrow capitalism and replace it with socialism. The film, having no explicit analysis is open to any and all analyses. As I watched it, some men near me groaned in recognition of some of Wanda's "dumb broad" moments.

The covert message of the film is that although Wanda is a victim, nothing can be done about it. She ends up in a roadhouse, joylessly drinking beer in a group and eating a hot dog — trading her presence for food — and the camera zooms in to frame her vacant face and freeze it in a grainy imitation of 400 BLOWS. The film seems to be a sheer description that totals up to an indictment. But nothing is indicted, or everything is: U.S. society — a category vague enough to give no solutions. And since Wanda is presented as completely unable to do anything positive for herself, the solution must fall on others ... classic liberal superiority. The film, showing no saving grace, no inherent or potential qualities for change in Wanda, makes her the ultimate powerless victim.

From Loden's perspective the Wandas of the world are not only powerless, but they are inherently incapable of doing anything for themselves, or by themselves, except to fall lower and lower. From beginning to end, Wanda's oppression is shown, but never her consciousness of that oppression. Clearly Wanda cannot actively rebel against her powerlessness, but the film also implies she is not even aware of her situation. And because it gives no minimal positive human

qualities — not even thinking, much less articulating anything; not even feeling, much less expressing anything — it denies she has any potential whatsoever to change. If the world around her changed, the film implies, Wanda would still be suitable only for the social scrap heap. This is the same set of ideas that underlies forced sterilization to cut welfare spending, and a host of other social control measures. In effect the film denies that women can fight sexism, except in escaping rapists, and it denies that class struggle exists, since Wanda cannot rise to her defense.

WANDA shows that the cinema verite style of narration has a message of its own. A "neutral style" is most manipulative when it hides the tracks of its manipulation. From that observation it is logical to ask if WANDA could be made or remade in a way that is either less pessimistic or less manipulative.

Bruce Connor's film, MARILYN TIMES FIVE, explores the question of how a film's form can influence the way an audience receives the content. He takes a little over a minute of footage from a film purported to be of Marilyn Monroe which is a girlie movie with Marilyn dressed only in panties. Connor's intent, he has said, was to take some parts of the found footage and rearrange them to see if the quintessential "Marilyn" could emerge. The point was to take footage with the crudest victimizing of a woman and deconstruct it to find the basically human in the images. Connor admits that the content is so gross that it was and is questionable in his mind if he succeeded in changing the given footage in which Marilyn is a victim of our voyeurism into something else. The film is "experimental" in the scientific sense: Connor set himself a project to see if he could do it. What he came up with is five different re-editing jobs, using loop repetitions of the footage he chose to work with, black leader, and Monroe singing "I'm Through with Love," five times. As it exists the film continues Connor's interest in portraying women, and his attempts in other films to attack the manipulation of humans by their media.

MARILYN TIMES FIVE forces the viewer to come to terms with the raw content of the footage, which unmistakably has a sexist voyeuristic appeal, as we see the same few hundred frames five, or twelve, or twenty times. Connor isolates through selection and then uses repetition to show the irreducibly human element in the film. A single fleeting gesture becomes the same gesture twenty times and no longer fleeting and thereby stands out from the naked body in the image. Thereby Connor lets us see those little things that can be read out of context by formal rearrangement: the gesture, the smile, the pout, the way of crossing arms and legs. Is Connor's new version sexist or not? That depends on the context of viewing, on the audience's predisposition. As

it is, the film does not satisfy as porn, which is some achievement at overcoming the given footage, but it still acts as a voyeuristic film : we can't totally stop watching the body, the torso, the legs, the breasts — they are inescapable. Which seems to show that, as Connor says, you can't escape the content through the form, though you can distance it. Connor can indicate certain things: that Marilyn Monroe was a human being, a person, not merely an object, even when she is in a film which was designed to make her an object. We see Marilyn as a victim of our voyeurism, but through Connor's isolation of and attention to the particularly individual traits of the actress, we also see she is more than a victim, or object. The woman in MARILYN TIMES FIVE is a person with individual and human characteristics as well. In the end, the Connor version is an homage to Marilyn Monroe as a person, and the most respectful homage to her that I'm familiar with.

These two films make a startling contrast in their treatment of women as victims. Connor shows that any human is more complex than a mere object, while Loden says that Wanda is only an object. The moral? Film style always has a message. Connor's experiment shows that while form cannot completely overcome some content, it can expose the surface of that content, distance us from it, and reveal an unnoticed or latent content.

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